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LOFTY: A Culminating Cinematic Experiment

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LOFTY: A Culminating Cinematic Experiment

by

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REPORT

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2013

Abstract

LOFTY: A Culminating Cinematic Experiment

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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The following report is an in depth, step-by-step analysis of the processes and experiments undertaken during the creation of the thesis film, “Lofty,” written, directed, photographed, scored, and edited by Patrick William Smith. From inception to mastering the finished film, this report serves to highlight the filmmaker’s rationale behind attempts at various experimental methods of pre-production, production, and post-production on the film.

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Chapter 1: Report Introduction

It had always been my understanding that one's thesis film should essentially be a culmination of everything learned over the course of the program, and as such, seemed to leave very little room for error. Inherent to that stigma was a form of pressure not felt on other projects. I never liked that. Though, over the course of the script development, pre-production, production, and post-production phases on my thesis film, "Lofty," my understanding and approach towards producing a thesis film evolved into something very different. I came to understand that, in fact, this did not need to be any kind of personal opus, but instead, the assignment felt more like a crucial last chance to freely experiment with every aspect of production. The consequences of failed experiments, I rationalized, would be as moot as they might ever be again. No clients to defy, no investors to be enslaved to, and potentially, no one but myself to entertain. Coming to this understanding may have been the single greatest profundity to come out of this undertaking for me, and left me feeling as free as I'd ever felt to experiment, hone, and dive deeper into the collaborative craft of filmmaking. Naturally, then, the prospect of creating a thesis film became interesting again.

Given the nature of this kind of experimental approach to filmmaking, this report will explore the experiments attempted in every phase of production, and the results, successful or unsuccessful, that came from them.

These experiments include:

1. Setting Narrow Script Parameters including:
 - a. Tell a compelling story using only 2 characters
 - b. Tell a compelling story within a single confined space
2. Setting Narrow Production Parameters including:
 - a. Adhere to a \$0 budget
3. Developing new techniques for filming, including:
 - a. A means of simulating P.O.V. flying
 - b. A “hovering” camera technique to be used within the office space to create the illusion/overall feeling of weightlessness
 - c. A technique for shooting transparently through glass
4. Attempting a more streamlined, continuous approach to acting/directing by:
 - a. Shooting the entire present-day portion of the film sequentially, and in the span of a single day
5. Developing an original sound palette for the musical score
6. Scoring the film using parallel, evolving musical motifs
7. Editing the film through the application of a rhythmic cutting approach

Chapter 2: Experimenting with Narrow Script Parameters

As keenly noted by my thesis supervisor (PJ Raval) during the early phases of script development, “Lofty” is essentially a one-act stage play translated for the screen through the medium of film. Studying and understanding this form of storytelling helped inform the development of the script. While there are periodic flashbacks throughout, the story technically takes place in real-time, in one confined space, and is limited to the interaction between only two characters. I chose to work within these limitations in the script phase as a personal challenge on my thesis for two reasons.

The first, by keeping the scope of the film contained I would allow myself, in theory, to focus more on honing each individual component of production. For example, with regard to the script, these parameters forced me to find ways of keeping the dialogue and plot points continuously interesting, dynamic, and surprising, as the entire piece centers on a single discussion. In essence, it could be viewed as an exaggerated trial of creating a self-contained scene from a larger film. I’ll discuss how these parameters allowed me to focus more specifically on other elements of production later in the report.

The second, and perhaps more logistical reason for working within these limitations, was entirely budget-oriented. As mentioned in the intro, I intended to view this project as one final “zero-pressure” learning situation, and in keeping with that idea, eliminating the pressure of finances was necessary. Thus, the goal became to entirely eliminate the need for a budget. Everything would have to be done for free. Not just cheaply, but entirely *free*. With this parameter in mind, the script forced me to write a piece that could be filmed without a budget, again forcing me to delve deeper and deeper

into the characters, and focus less on visual effects, set pieces, and locations. Again, I'll discuss this parameter in greater detail during the preproduction portion of this report.

Chapter 3: Script Inception, Development & “Finding Common Ground”

While collaborating with a diverse group of classmates coming from various creative backgrounds over the last few years, it has become clear that all filmmakers employ their own unique forms of developing ideas for scripts. Myself included. Looking back, the pattern is clear, definitive, and unmistakably consistent. That is, it always starts with a song.

The musical “seed” in this case, or the single source of initial inspiration for developing the “Lofty” script, was a very specific track from the “Battlestar Galactica” soundtrack, composed by one of two composers whom I respect beyond all others, Bear McCreary. A protégé of the late composer Elmer Bernstein (*Ghostbusters*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*), and little known outside the limited fanatical circles that adore him, McCreary has an incredible talent to tell musical stories, with beginnings, middles, endings, twists, red herrings, McGuffins, dénouements, etc., melodically interweaved throughout his score, and often accomplishes this within the boundaries of a single track. The specific track of inspiration in this case, entitled, “A Promise to Return,” encapsulated this narrative quality beautifully. And while I’m self-admittedly prone to over-analysis, I could easily make the case that this track summarizes the entire five-season arc of the series (though perhaps better left for another paper). The takeaway however, is that within the mere three minutes and six seconds that comprise the track, this short narrative began to take shape.

However, this track was only the beginning of my inspiration, as its quality and tone reminded me of something from my past – a series of recurring, highly lucid dreams I had as a young child, which eventually influenced everything that appears in the film today. While the hazy nature of dreams often makes it challenging to accurately recount them, for the sake of documentation and relevance to this report, I'll try to summarize:

I was four years old (I only know this because I can cross-reference the house my family lived in during that brief period). The dreams would begin in reality. I was dreaming, but I never knew it. And life, it seemed, was normal. I would open my eyes, still in my bed under my covers, and look around the room. My two brothers would lie asleep in their beds, unaware that I was “awake.” And then it would come; a sensation that, if I just tried, and tried hard enough, I might just be able to fly. So, I would concentrate. I would close my eyes again, and concentrate on flying, as if by the power of the mind alone. And soon, a feeling of weightlessness would take over. I would feel myself begin to rise, and when I opened my eyes again, I'd be hovering just below the ceiling, looking down on the room. Occasionally, the dreams would stop there, but sometimes, on particularly fun nights, I would have time to play with my new ability, twisting and turning in the air, flipping, sliding, diving, etc., though all within the confines of my bedroom. These dreams were so vivid in fact that I actually looked *forward* to getting sent to bed in the evenings. To this day, no dream has ever felt so real, or so magical, and it soon became my goal to combine and explore this kind of blending between reality and imagination with regard to the subject of human flight within the script.

The vivid memories of these lucid dreams and listening to, “A Promise to Return,” eventually coalesced into what would constitute the initial treatment for the narrative. Wanting to explore the idea of human flight, yet hoping to “ground” it in the real world, it seemed a natural first step to pit a psychologist (Alan, the epitome of rational thinking) against a patient who believed he could fly (Peter, the personification of all things irrational). From here, the rest of the scriptwriting process became about one thing: finding a means of convincing an overly-rational person that human flight is real, and accomplishing this in the span of about ten minutes. This proved to be, by far, the most challenging part of the screenwriting process, particularly within the parameters I set for myself with this project.

Script development, overall, progressed as it often does for me. In other words, it was a long, drawn out, painful process of cutting, adding, twisting, rearranging, and eventually starting over from scratch. While the original ideas for the two characters stayed consistent, their backgrounds, motives, and personalities went through a number of revisions before their roles in the film were cemented.

As previously mentioned, the largest obstacle from a screenwriting perspective, would be to find a believable way of convincing the psychologist (Alan) to believe in something that is inherently unbelievable, and to do so in a very short period of real-time. At first, I approached the psychologist as a character who was so dedicated to the science of psychology, that any solution outside the parameters of his expensive education was off limits to him during therapy, thereby rendering him imagination-less. His arc, then, would be based around finding a need to reinvigorate, or instigate for the first time, his

imagination. Using this as a starting point, it soon became clear that any impetus to entirely reverse a lifetime of practical thinking and logic-based practices would need to be dramatic and/or life altering. This realization, this need for intensity, is what eventually drove the direction of the film from what was originally a hyper-stylized, poetic blending of realities, into a more straightforward genre-based approach with glints of fantasy peppered throughout. In essence, I needed to provide an earth-shattering catalyst for change for the psychologist, which lent itself well to a “fantasy-thriller” scripting approach.

Naturally then, the next step was finding a reason for Alan to *need* to change. Logically, if Alan measures the success of his life by the success of his practice, the impetus for change could potentially stem from that goal, or more specifically, from failing to achieve that goal through the rational methods he’s subscribed himself to for so long. The proverbial light-bulb, then, that dictated the rest of the script was realizing that Alan’s rational approach to counseling may not always be effective, and could even, potentially, have led to the death of one of his patients. The stakes then, become incredibly high for Alan. Essentially, if Alan adheres to his usual method of logic-based counseling with this particular patient, he could be putting that patient’s life at risk, especially if that patient threatens to jump out his high-rise office window in order to fly.

This brings us to Peter, Alan’s antithesis. First of all, Peter himself needed a rational reason for believing he could fly, or for *needing* to fly – something that would drive him to want to believe in something unnatural. Figuring in what I already knew about how Alan’s (the psychologist) character needed to function, I found Peter’s driving

force in the one common factor that connected these characters on a profoundly deep level: the loss of Peter's son, and the idea that Alan could be responsible for that death. This was the common ground I needed to provide a platform for Peter and Alan to finally understand one another, and is what led to Peter's eventual goal, which was to force Alan to understand that a parent would do absolutely anything to protect their child, even if that meant learning how to fly.

Consequently, this then led to the idea that Peter's son was also seen by Alan a few years ago because he believed, truly, that he could fly. When Alan instructed Peter that these kinds of imaginative dreams were normal and healthy for a young boy, that boy misinterpreted that to mean he should continue to believe in his delusions of flying. Tragically, this would lead the boy to jump off a cliff in order to fly, and serves as the origin for Peter's flying dreams, which bring him back to Alan in the first place. When Peter realizes (or rationalizes in denial) that his son may have actually just flown away and not fallen to his death, he theorizes that perhaps his son was able to fly simply *because* Alan encouraged him to. And with that, Peter's motivation in the film becomes clear – he needs Alan, the key, to believe that Peter can fly too, so that he can go find his lost son.

While somewhat complex, all the pieces seemed to be fitting nicely at this point. The main problem, however, still remained. How could Peter *actually* convince Alan to believe in flying? And thus, the final twist of the film originated. When Peter realizes that Alan is not in a position to *ever* encourage Peter to jump from his window, he resorts to one last-ditch effort. In order to get Alan to truly understand where Peter is coming from,

Peter decides that Alan will have to feel what it's like to lose a child, thus forcing Alan to understand the lengths a parent might go to get back a child, even if that means doing something seemingly insane. So, Peter lies to Alan, indirectly insinuating that he may have killed Alan's daughter out of revenge. It is this plot twist that forces Alan to understand just how desperate a parent can get when it comes to the safety of their child. When Alan finds himself threatening to kill Peter, he himself begins to understand the fine line between what is crazy and what is sane, rooting them in common ground.

Ultimately, however, it still didn't seem entirely plausible that Alan would encourage Peter to jump out his window, which led me to the conclusion that Alan didn't actually need to overtly admit to Peter that he understood him, he just had to show it, leading to Peter's surprising leap after Alan acknowledges that he almost did something "crazy" to protect his child.

While I was aware that there were some unmistakably clear parallels to suicide (as an escape from the pain of the loss of a child) in this script, that veiled theme was not intended to define this film. In fact, the suicide thread served more as a red herring than anything else. From the beginning, the purpose of the story for me, was to rationalize the idea of human flight, and to allow it come to fruition in the lives of these characters. So, of course, the film needed to end with Peter actually being able to fly. While this was debated heavily in the process of peer reviewing the script, it was the one element I knew needed to be preserved.

In this way, the scriptwriting process happened organically, with one character development leading to the next, until all the pieces fit, forwards and backwards. And

while the initial intention to keep Alan (the psychologist) as the protagonist remained intact, the question still lingered as to which character in fact drove the narrative. In complimentary fashion, Alan and Peter actually experience inverse arcs from one another. Though partly an act, Peter is portrayed as shifting from insane to rational, while Alan experiences a descent from rationality to madness as he eventually reaches a point where he threatens to end Peter's life. This seemed to be a fitting way of orchestrating a mutual understanding between two highly contrasting characters.

NOTE**: The shooting script (attached to this document as Appendix A) and the final edited version of the film differ immensely with regard to script length. It became abundantly clear after the first edited assembly of the film that the script utilized excessive dialogue where mere nuances in acting could convey often-expositional and dizzyingly circular dialogue. This will be discussed further in the post-production portion of this report.

Chapter 4: Experiments in Pre-Production, Casting, & Pre-Visualization

Pre-production on “Lofty” involved three distinct categories of preparation:

1. Casting
2. Rehearsing
3. Pre-visualization

CASTING

Casting for this film was a surprisingly simple, straightforward process compared to my previous works. Luckily, as I was writing the script, two very specific local actors came to mind as inspirations for the characters, and both of them signed onto the project after being approached. Nothing experimental here.

For the character of Peter’s son, Nicholas, I knew there would be no onscreen dialogue for the boy, so it became a search for the right look. We found that look in a young boy named Austin New, who exhibited the internalizing, highly introspective and imaginative mannerisms I had hoped to find in a boy who might dream of flying. His resemblance to Peter (the boy’s father) was of minor importance, because I had planned to shoot most of the father-son sequences in silhouette, thus minimizing the need for physical likeness.



Illustration 1: Example of “Nicholas” Silhouetted

REHEARSING

In previous projects, I viewed rehearsing as a necessary step towards familiarizing the actors with their rigidly predefined lines of dialogue, and secondly, for blocking purposes. However, in holding to the experimental nature of this project, I thought it appropriate to try something new here as well.

Rehearsals this time around would instead be about collaborative creation. In other words, I went into rehearsals allowing the script to remain in flux, and open to natural changes, evolutions, and tweaks informed by the actors themselves as they began to understand their characters deeper. This, I can confidently say, was one of the best decisions I made for the film.

Allowing the actors to have some creative control over how they might more naturally deliver lines and letting them choose to deviate from the actual actions written

on the page and instead take the conversation in different, often more interesting and natural directions, served to bring an otherwise stiffened script to life.

As a team, we even worked out a number of kinks that existed in the script prior to rehearsing. The actors were free to question their characters' motivations, forcing us to delve further into creating more naturalistic interactions between the two. The process seemed healthy and productive for all of us, and gave the actors more of a reason to get invested in their roles and in the film as a whole. It is important to note, however, that this style of rehearsing might not prove equally effective with all types of actors, as it requires a good deal of investment, creativity, and like-mindedness on the part of the actors. Luckily, my actors brought all of that to the table.

PREVISUALIZATION

Deciding to both direct and D.P. the film meant that extra visual preparation would be needed with regard to photography in order to keep things running smoothly while juggling both duties on set. More so, some of the elements of the film (flying, jumping out of windows, jumping off cliffs, etc.) required me to develop some of my own techniques for accomplishing some of the visual challenges posed by the script. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Chapter 5: Experiments in Cinematography

The most obvious (and daunting) filming challenge would be developing a low-budget method of capturing P.O.V. flying footage at high altitudes. I knew that to actually “sell” the P.O.V. flying shots to an audience, the technique would need to be smooth, fast, and serve the function of simulating the view that might be created by “winged flying.” Under the budget restraints I set for myself (i.e. \$0 budget), I could immediately cross off aerial and steadicam shots from the list of feasible possibilities. So, I resorted to something a bit more rustic, and much more physically demanding.

The summer prior to production, I fashioned a makeshift steadicam out of a cheap DSLR “Fly-cam” rig I already owned, two gimbal-hinged aluminum arms, and an internal-frame hiking backpack. Though hideous, the resulting contraption turned me into, essentially, a soaring cyborg, and allowed me to sprint at full speeds across uneven terrains while still minimizing the erratic transfer of motion to the camera itself. However, this makeshift technique came with a long list of serious limitations that needed to be compensated for, including but not limited to:

1. The need to shoot on the widest available lens (12mm on a micro 4/3 cropped sensor in this case) in order to minimize camera shake.
2. The loss of some image-quality compared to the rest of the film. Since the rig could only support the weight of a DSLR (23.98fps, 1080p resolution), I made the “risky” decision of activating a digital hack for DSLR’s known as “Magic Lantern,” which was created by programmers who found they

could actually bypass the governing limitations of the camera's operating software in order to shoot at much higher bit rates through q-scale adjustments, and add approximately 2 extra stops of dynamic range to the image itself. This helped match the 4.5K resolution RED Mysterium X footage that comprised the rest of the film with the flying shots, allowing them to intercut more seamlessly.

3. The need for excessive amounts of takes. Because the rig I created required near-perfect balancing calibrations prior to filming, the rig would often slip out-of-balance, and require readjusting in the field. And unfortunately, inherent to the high altitude locales I was shooting in, high winds made for an incredibly frustrating, highly repetitive filming process. Though highly physically demanding, the scenery was beautiful, and the exercise was energizing. If not for that, the process would have otherwise been terribly exhausting.

I first tested this technique on three separate 14,000+ ft. peaks in the Collegiate Peaks area of southern Colorado. The rig was light and compact enough that it fit nicely in the hiking backpack that comprised the support system for it, allowing me to reach high altitudes for capturing epic views from what felt like the top of the world.



Illustration 2: Example of Flying Technique

I spent weeks honing an operating technique that enabled me to smoothly cant the image left/right, up/down to give the illusion of a bird or plane banking, catching thermal drifts, and accelerating.

The results of that test were organized into a montage that served as a visual poem to help inspire the rest of the production, a process I undergo for every film I direct. The “visual poem” in this instance, was a flying montage of the experimental shots compiled in Colorado, set to the above-mentioned song of inspiration, “A Promise to Return,” by Bear McCreary from the “Battlestar Galactica” soundtrack. These “visual poems” serve as references for the overall visual tone of the film, and are helpful to refer to in times of confusion or backtracking during pre-production phases. It is interesting to note that the

montage video was preceded by a quote from Peter Pan that seemed to encapsulate the essence of the film I was hoping to create. The quote read:

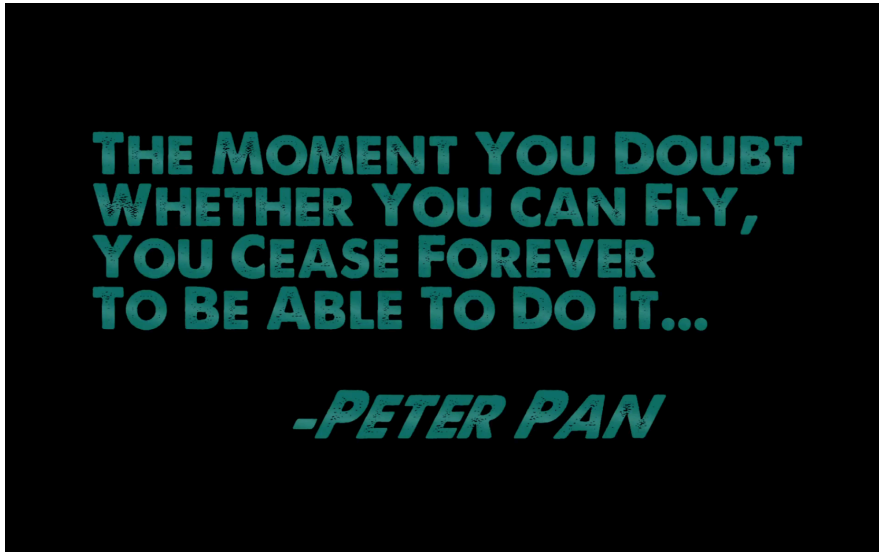


Illustration 3: Example of Visual Poem Quote

****NOTE:** Accordingly, “Peter,” then, naturally became the name of the character in the film who wanted to fly - a fitting nod to a story that influenced so much of my childhood, and likely played a role in inspiring the flying dreams that eventually inspired the film.

Other cinematographic experiments for the film included:

1. Creating the illusion of openness in the office window by adjusting filtered-polarization on the lens and matching the intensity and color temperature of midday light in the interior space. This accomplished the necessary illusion that the window actually gets blown out in the office. Avoiding reflections in the window proved difficult, forcing us to physically hide the reflections of lights behind characters in the frame.



Illustration 4: Example of Unhidden Light Behind Alan's Head



Illustration 5: Example of Hidden Light Behind Alan's Head

2. Creating the illusion of revolving around 3D lens flares. In order to distinctly and visually separate the present-day timeline from the memory/dream timeline, I wanted to include elements in the “mise en scene” that gave the impression of being in a fantasy world, wherein light and physics work differently in the fantasy world than they might in space based in reality. One attempt at doing so aimed to use natural lens flares in a 3D space, achieved by manually compensating the pan and tilt of the camera to match/compensate for the motion of the camera as it moved laterally on the “dolly.” The resulting effect provides just enough parallax to create the illusion that you’re actually revolving *around* a lens flare in 3D space, as opposed to the flare being dictated by the normal two-dimensional space of the frame.



Illustration 6: Example of “3D” Lens Flare Effect

3. Employing section-specific camera operating techniques. One of the challenges inherent in a film that takes place in a single space between two characters is the need to keep the energy of the film fresh and dynamic to compensate for the lack of visual variety. Luckily, because the script contained various twists, turns, and misdirection, I was able to motivate three distinct cinematographic techniques to enhance each tonal block of the film.

The first technique, which introduces the concept of the film, utilized “floating” clean singles of the two characters. Choosing not to start with OTS shots, and instead keep them clean, helped visually separate the two characters, because at this point in the film they are the furthest away from finding common ground. The “floating” technique, created by compensating lateral dolly motion with reverse-direction panning, was intended to convey a feeling of weightlessness in this section, coinciding and foreshadowing the flying thread of the film.



Illustration 7: Example of Clean Floating Intro Singles

The second technique was basically a slight modification of the first technique, only now the characters were placed in OTS configurations within the frame. This helped signify progress towards understanding one another, allowing both characters to inhabit the space of the frame in some way at all times.



Illustration 8: Example of OTS Floating Singles

The third technique, which comes into effect as Peter begins to lose his temper, carries the film through to the end. To throw off the stability of the action in this section, I used a controlled handheld OTS style of shooting, wherein I “cramped” the framing more than usual to instill a sense of claustrophobia (and thus more tension and discomfort) in the image.



Illustration 9: Example of Handheld OTS Cramped Frame Singles

Chapter 6: Experiments in Production – Continuous Sequential Directing, Pre-Rigging & Match-Temp Lighting, Practical Effects, & Shooting in Scotland

CONTINUOUS SEQUENTIAL DIRECTING

Perhaps the most frightening experiment undertaken on this film was the decision to shoot the entire office sequence (basically, the entire dialogue portion of the film) in a single day. For a thirteen-page script, this goal initially seemed completely unachievable in the span of a single twelve-hour production day. For reference and comparison, the shooting rate on fast-paced indie feature film sets averages about five shooting pages per day. The goal, then, was to nearly triple that productivity on this set.

However, I was adamant about experimenting with the potential benefits of allowing the actors to experience the full range of emotions of their characters, sequentially, in a single day. In theory, if the actors could get through the script in a single day of shooting, they might be able to sustain a more naturally-paced progression of emotional highs and lows better than if they were forced to try to match intensities from previous shooting days. This theory seemed especially applicable to a film that takes place in real time.

PRE-RIGGING & MATCH-TEMP LIGHTING

To accomplish this kind of ultra-productivity, my team spent a half-day prior to the shoot pre-rigging twelve different lights in the office space in the exact positions, intensities, and diffusion configurations that would be necessary to shoot every shot the

following day at the flip of a switch. This highly calculated prep made all the difference in terms of being able to finish shooting the film in a single day.

However, working in this manner did introduce a few new setbacks and challenges, the most difficult of which was the necessity to continuously match the shifting color-temperature of the sun outside the window with the color-temperature of the light in the interior space. Knowing that I would be able to correct the overall color-balance of the film in post-production, the key to matching the sunlight was to maintain exact color-temperature “differentials” between what was outside the window, and what was inside the window. In other words, if I wanted the interior space to be slightly cooler than the evening exterior space, I would have to continuously “cool” or “warm” the interior lights with varying gels as the sun arced in color temperature from warm morning light, to cool midday light, to warm evening light. It was a dance, to say the least, but proved a fun challenge.

PRACTICAL EFFECTS

I have developed a propensity to stay as far away from computerized special effects as possible, and prefer to accomplish effects practically whenever possible. In my opinion, it only takes a single ineffective effects shot to ruin the illusion of a film. I didn’t want to risk destroying the magic of the film, so we went the practical route.

In order to film Peter jumping off the ledge of the window at the end of the film, we orchestrated the illusion with a simple carpeted platform, some broken glass, and access to an open space that mimicked the view seen from the window of the office.

When location scouting, we chose the particular 7th floor office location for just that very reason. The space we used as the interior of Alan's office was on the top floor of a building that we had roof access to, thus, we could very easily recreate the same (or highly similar) view from the roof directly above the office space as seen in the space below. Then, it was just a matter of building a platform that resembled the floor of the office and could be raised to a height that one could jump off the platform and fall beneath the precipice of the platform, creating the illusion of jumping out the office window. For safety purposes, we positioned the platform about 30ft. from the ledge of the rooftop, and raised it about 8ft. from the ground. We then placed a large, pillow-top mattress in front of the platform for Peter to land on after jumping. The result:



Illustration 10: Example of Practical Platform Jumping Effect

Otherwise, the only other practical effect required for the film was a massive lighting change within the office space after the window gets blown out, simulating a higher contrast, higher intensity light from the sun as it would no longer have a pane of glass in front of it serving to decrease the intensity of the light in the scenes previous to the shattered window. To simulate the wind in the space, and to do so quietly, we employed two crew members lying on the floor on both sides of the characters, waving massive Styrofoam boards in an upwards direction.



Illustration 11: Example of Int./Ext. Light Matching w/ Simulated Wind

SHOOTING IN SCOTLAND

Perhaps the most exhilarating facet of production was filming on location in the Scottish highlands. Deciding to shoot in Scotland fulfilled one very specific purpose for this production: adventure.

I have a personal and highly unscientific theory that films are more successful when the crew gets to experience, to some extent, the emotions of the characters in the film. I want to believe that it helps create a deeper connection to the material, and thus a greater personal investment in making the film a success. In this instance, I wanted to accomplish something more adventurous, more strenuous, and ultimately more gratifying than heading to a “hill” in Texas to capture the proto-flying shots required to complete the film. No offense, Texas, but your landscapes rarely inspire me to want to fly. As an homage to a film with one of the greatest goose-bump-inducing flight scenes ever made, I chose to film the flying footage above the same lake used during Buckbeak’s flight (a winged horse creature) in a scene from *Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Yes, I’m shamelessly in love with Alfonso Cuarón’s work on this film). Thus, we headed to a small village in the heart of the western Scottish highlands called, Glencoe, the filming location for that scene in *Harry Potter*. It was here that we climbed the “Pap of Glencoe.” After an 8-hour uphill trek, we waited patiently for the sun to burn its way through the thick, constant fog that inhabits this area year-round. As we waited, I arranged my “fly-rig,” spending about two hours calibrating the balance. As we prepped, we noticed a massive storm approaching in the distance (NOTE: It is now the first week of November, and snow has yet to fall on this area of the highlands, which were covered with a beautiful bright red tussock, normally green and gold in the summer months), and as the storm passed over distant peaks, it would leave behind it a thick blanket of white snow.

And it was coming straight for us. We only had about three hours of light left, and the sun had just decided to show itself, providing the perfect otherworldly ambience for a flying dream sequence. So, with a snowstorm approaching and little time to work, I started running with the camera rig. And I ran, and ran, and ran. In all, I had over 300 attempted shots to sift through by the time the sun went down. Some of which, to the dismay of my parents and likely a few faculty, were along sheer cliffs and massive precipices. For the scene where Peter's son actually jumps off the cliff, I literally run towards a ledge then swung the camera out over the ledge several feet to really sell the concept. At this point, I was exhausted from the hike up, three hours of sprinting around uneven rocks at high altitudes, and we still had at least a 6-hour trek back down the mountain, and in the dark. And of course, just as we begin our descent, the storm reaches us. It dropped heavy snow on us for the first couple hours, and eventually turned to freezing rain as we reached lower altitudes. To make matters more interesting, I had ripped a massive hole in the back corner of my hiking pack, where rain and snow were seeping through. My only concern at this point was keeping the camera and SD cards safe. And to my surprise, everything functioned properly when we reached our warm hostel. Flying footage, check. Adventure, check.

Chapter 7: Experiments in Music Composition, Scoring, & Melodic Motif Evolution

Though I keep promising to stop scoring my own films, when the time comes to marry picture and score, I can't seem to stop myself. I rationalize that if I'm the closest one to the material, I should be aptly and perhaps best suited to create a score that symbiotically matches, compliments, or teases the narrative themes at work at different times throughout the film. **This isn't true.** Really, I just love the scoring process and think that one day, I'll be much better off (as will my films) handing this job over to another musician who can bring something new to my films – someone who can approach the score with a fresh, outside perspective, and help bring new dimensions to the story through music. However, in adhering to the experimental/educational approach for this project, I decided to take one last crack at really understanding the fine interplay that can exist between score and picture. The more I understand how the two work together, the better I'll be at communicating future visions to composers of future projects.

In terms of experimentation, I decided to invent my own unique sound palette for the score. Aside from the standard strings, percussion, and wind instruments, I wanted to unify the score with an instrument that could be peppered throughout, and might convey a sense of otherworldliness. Using a signal generator and a variety of reverb plugins inside Logic 9, I started developing the instrument I now call, "Ricocheting Stars," which can be heard in varying tones throughout the score of the film. In essence, this electronic instrument is a syncopated electronic signal that bounces in 1/8th notes in a circular,

surround-sound motion when played. I was able to assign this new sound to the keys on my midi controller, allowing it to be used as a full-scale instrument. The instrument sounds like a mixture between glass reverberations and steel guitar strings. The purpose of creating this new instrument for the film was to introduce something entirely foreign or imaginative into an otherwise grounded sound palette in an attempt to signify to the audience that something about this film defies or takes place outside of reality. Also, because the progression of the film is highly volatile and at times, bi-polar, it felt appropriate to designate a musical unifier that could span the length of the score, bringing cohesion to what would otherwise be a highly erratic score for a highly erratic film.

With regard to motifs, it's incredibly challenging to introduce, reintroduce, and evolve musical themes over the course of a short film. In an effort to do so, however, I limited myself to introducing two musical themes in the film that were then revisited as derivations later in the film. The purpose behind repeating variations of themes in the film was to prime audiences to feel the evolution or de-evolution of narrative themes, and to signify to an audience that a character or theme may be going through a significant change in the story.

The first repeated theme is used whenever Peter talks about the loss of his son. This motif toys with the idea of a lullaby, conveying childhood and imagination, yet driven by dark undertones and foreshadowing the eventual reveal of the son jumping off the cliff. Naturally, this theme is revisited in its full form during the reveal of the son jumping, only this second iteration is much darker, and much heavier. In essence, the

musical theme helps answer the question posed early on in the narrative – how did Peter lose his son?

The second musical theme revisited in the film relates to the theme of insanity, and is only used during the two scenes where each character loses his ability to stay rational (i.e. when Peter threatens to shoot Alan and when Alan threatens to kill Peter). Again, the theme gets much darker when revisited, dropping two keys, and speeding up in tempo.

Another important consideration during the scoring process was finding appropriate places during which I could allow the film to breathe in its own ambience. Allowing the film to “rest” un-scored in certain places helped to create moments of realism and to enhance dramatic pauses in the rhythm of the editing.

My favorite cue from the score expresses itself just prior to the end-credit sequence. In an attempt to parallel the final twist, or the idea that people in this world really can fly, I wanted to utilize a piece of music that, like the plot twist, felt entirely unexpected, energetic, and adventurous. This led to an ending music cue that does *not* employ the unifying “Ricocheting Stars” instrument, and is instead comprised entirely of energetic and atmospheric synths. It harkens to the ‘80s, and is intended to convey a feeling of nostalgia, paralleling Peter’s return to a childlike state.

Chapter 8: A Rhythmic Approach to Editing

While not particularly experimental, my editing approach for “Lofty,” was driven by the need to:

1. Condense. I ended up eliminating approximately 3 pages of explanatory dialogue to make the film easier to digest and to allow the audience to develop their own answers to questions posed in the script, rather than allowing characters to offer up all the answers.
2. Create “hills and valleys” with regard to rhythm and pacing. The film is essentially comprised of a single conversation, thus the need to vary the rhythm of the conversation was integral in keeping the flow of beats varied enough to stay interesting. Holding on one character for multiple lines, or holding on characters who aren’t speaking, helped keep the constant dialogue from becoming too monotonous. Also, increasing the speed and frequency of the cuts during the most intense moments helped build urgency and disconnectedness in those moments.
3. Find appropriate places to enter Peter and Alan’s headspaces through cutaways to the dream sequences. The only relief the viewer gets from the confines of Alan’s small office during the film are the brief views of Peter’s flying dreams and memories, so it was important to find lulls in the action and moments of monotony during the shot/reverse-shot dialogue cutting,

where the audience can essentially “reset” their eyes with corresponding flying shots, and briefly escape the claustrophobic environment of the office.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Allowing myself the freedom to experiment during the production of my thesis film, “Lofty,” resulted in something far more valuable than the creation of a mere functional film. To some extent, in fact, I feel like I started to truly define my own stylistic voice as a filmmaker and storyteller during this process – an unexpected but timely outcome as my time as a student races to a close. As I ready myself to depart the program, I feel keenly aware of the weaknesses and strengths I now possess as a filmmaker, giving me some good direction for future projects.

Looking back, I seem to have approached my three years here at UT in a similarly experimental fashion, having attempted a new genre with every required project. From a racially charged documentary (Shades of the Border), to a quirky stylized comedy (Slim Mints), to an adventure-romance in a dying language (The Longest Sun), and now, a fantasy-thriller (Lofty), I have come to appreciate the breadth of storytelling experience I’ve received from my time studying here.

Appendix

Appendix A: Complete Shooting Script

Appendix B: Video File: Patrick_Smith_Lofty_Thesis_Rough_Cut.mp4

Appendix C: Video File: Patrick_Smith_Lofty_Thesis_flying_test_footage.mp4

INT. ALAN'S OFFICE, 26TH FLOOR - MAGIC HOUR

OVER CREDITS: Peter sits lifeless in a thick, pleated, leather chair, entranced by particles of dust swirling in the air, glinting as they pass through light entering a nearby window.

The particles swirl, swoop, elevate, sink, as though playing a weightless game. Flying.

Peter tilts his head, examining.

ALAN
Peter. Peter?

Peter slowly looks up, as though he heard Alan the first time and ignored it.

ALAN (CONT'D)
Why don't you tell me about these
dreams you've been having?

Peter stares back.

PETER
They're not dreams. More like,
memories.

ALAN
Memories of what?

PETER
Of something I haven't done yet.

ALAN
How can you remember something
you've never done?

PETER
Actually, I was hoping you could
tell me.

Peter closes his eyes...

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAINTOPS - VARIOUS TIMES

MONTAGE: Various landscapes, soaring, accelerating, intercut with dialogue in the office.

PETER
It's like I'm running, without
touching the ground. Gliding.

ALAN
And where are you?

PETER
Up high. Above everything.

ALAN
And where are you running to?

PETER
The edges. The precipices.

INTERCUT: Gliding towards different cliffs.

ALAN
And then what? Do you jump?

Veers rapidly towards a cliff-

PETER
I want to.

CUT TO:

INT. ALAN'S OFFICE, 26TH FLOOR - MAGIC HOUR

Alan moves closer to Peter.

PETER
But I can't.

ALAN
Peter, what you're experiencing -
these thoughts - they're actually
pretty common in situations like
this.

PETER
Really?

ALAN
Absolutely. When a parent loses a
child - it's like they've lost a
piece of themselves. It can be a
very confusing time. How - how
often do you dream about killing
yourself, Peter?

PETER
Killing myself? What?

Alan stops. Confused.

ALAN
Your dreams. They're not about-?

Peter and Alan finally connect.

PETER
No, no. You misunderstood me. I
have no intention of killing
myself.

ALAN
Then why do you want to jump?

Peter smiles. An odd, crazy smile, head cocks back up towards Alan.

PETER
(of course-like)
So I can fly.

Something blurry, black, races from the sky towards the window behind Alan, until - THWACK! The object ricochets off, too quickly to be seen.

Alan spins, startled. A picture frame falls off Alan's desk in the commotion.

ALAN
What the hell-

Alan stands and goes to the window to look down.

ALAN (CONT'D)
Every time they wash the windows,
the birds - they just fly straight
into em'.

As Alan turns back, Peter is directly behind him, holding the broken picture frame. Alan, again, is startled. How Peter got there, so quickly and quietly, is unknown.

PETER
Your daughter?

Alan reaches out to take the frame from him, startled a bit.

ALAN
It is. 39

PETER
Beautiful. What's her name?

Alan places the frame back onto the desk. Changes the subject. Peter is still looking down at his own hands.

ALAN
Peter, you understand that if you
were to jump, you *wouldn't* fly,
right? You'd fall.

Peter, hands covering his face, shakes his head "no," and is starting to lose control. Some tears spill out between his fingers.

PETER
(eyes closed)
You don't understand. I don't just
see it. I hear it, smell it. I *feel*
it, Alan -

Peter opens his eyes. He's facing the window.

PETER (CONT'D)
And it feels a hell of a lot more
real than all this.

ALAN
You're just a little confused right
now. That's all. Think of it like -
like your brain is lying to you.

Pause. That strikes a chord in Peter. He looks up at Alan with threatening eyes.

PETER
What if *you're* the one who's lying?
What if it's *your* reality that's
skewed here, not mine? If I can't
trust me, why the hell should I
trust you?

ALAN
You don't need to trust *me*, Peter.
Trust physics.

Alan picks up a book from his desk and drops it onto the floor. It makes a loud thump, sending a puff of dust upwards. This stops Peter from his frantic pacing for a brief moment.

ALAN (CONT'D)

Trust reality. Trust precedent.
We've seen what happens when
someone jumps off a cliff. It does
not go well for them.

PETER

Maybe they fell because no one
believed in them anymore, Alan.
When all they needed was just one
person. One single person, to try
and understand them.

Alan shakes his head. He's not buying it.

ALAN

They fell because they couldn't
face reality. But you, Peter,
you're going to face yours. We just
have to start at the beginning.
What, Peter, do you think's so
important about flying? Why do you
need to fly?

PETER

(earnest)

So I can go find my son, Alan.

Alan is taken aback.

ALAN

Find your - find your son? Peter
your son is -

Peter won't let him finish -

PETER

(accusatory)

You think I'm crazy.

ALAN

No. No. That is not what I think. I
think you're-

Peter lurches forward towards Alan, stopping inches in front
of him. Their faces, too close for comfort.

PETER

You think I'm insane.

Alan puts his hand on Peter's shoulder. Allaying.

ALAN

No Peter, I think you're a good Dad. A good Dad who lost a great son. And that in order to cope, your brain has created an alternate reality, a better, happier place. A place where you can fly, and where the pain of losing a son doesn't exist.

Peter's eyes fill with withheld tears. He looks down, ashamed maybe.

ALAN (CONT'D)

And I think, if you tell me what happened, tell me how your son died, we can face it, together, right here. And you'll get your reality back.

Peter breaks down. He can hardly speak.

PETER

(straining)

My son's not dead.

Alan thinks a moment. Calculating his next move. Peter is tugging at his own hair, desperate for an answer he can grasp.

ALAN

Tell me what happened, Peter. Your denial is preventing you from moving forward. Confront the truth, and then you'll realize, people can't fly.

Peter looks up at, Alan. A quiet rage fills him.

PETER

That's not what you told my son.

Alan freezes. A gripping freeze.

ALAN

(eyeing, curious)

What?

Peter finally looks back up, slowly, at Alan. His eyes, different.

PETER
(shaking)
You still don't remember me, do
you?

Alan doesn't. Confusion.

PETER (CONT'D)
We brought our son to you. Three
years ago. Nicholas. He was eight.
He believed. He bel-

Alan thinks, then, light bulb-

ALAN
(interrupting)
He believed he could fly.

Alan's eyes widen. The pieces, falling together.

ALAN (CONT'D)
I - I remember, Peter.

PETER
(whispering, cocked)
And do you remember what you told
him?

Alan shakes his head.

PETER (CONT'D)
(erupting)
You told him it was okay!!

Peter throws the picture frame of Alan's daughter at the
wall, shattering it.

PETER (CONT'D)
That he had a healthy imagination!

Peter circles Alan, menacing. He overturns Alan's desk.

PETER (CONT'D)
That it was normal for a boy his
age and that we didn't need to
worry!

Peter overturns the bookcase, pages and books everywhere.

Then he pauses, calms, catches his breath.

PETER (CONT'D)
And do you know what he did?

Alan shakes his head. No.

PETER (CONT'D)
He listened.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAINTOP - MAGIC HOUR

NICHOLAS (11), spins in circles atop the mountain summit, arms spread like a bird, pretending to fly as he stares longingly at the clouds above.

PETER V.O.
We were hiking.

Peter stops atop the summit, looking out.

PETER V.O. (CONT'D)
I looked away. Just for a second.

Peter stares off.

PETER V.O. (CONT'D)
By the time I looked up, it was too late.

Nicholas sprints towards the edge of the cliff, smile as wide as the sea.

Peter stands and attempts to run after him. He won't catch up.

PETER V.O. (CONT'D)
He wasn't scared. He was smiling.

Nicholas smiles as he barrels towards the precipice.

PETER V.O. (CONT'D)
And then he just - jumped.

CUT TO:

INT. ALAN'S OFFICE - MAGIC HOUR

Alan, understanding his part in all this, is frozen, speechless. He stares into Peter's eyes, which flash an excruciating pain.

Then Peter's eyes change. Sadness turns to rage.

PETER
He jumped because of you. Because
you *believed* in him.

ALAN
Oh god. You - you think I killed
your son?

Peter is shaking everywhere. Something is wrong. Alan notices
just as -

Peter lifts a GUN into frame, pointing it directly at Alan's
head. Inches from his face, point blank.

A CLICK. Cocked.

Alan closes his eyes, wincing, prepping.

ALAN (CONT'D)
Peter, you don't have to-

BANG!

The bullet whizzes past Alan's head, shattering the massive
window behind him. Wind spills into the space, catching
papers and hair.

Peter passes Alan, Alan's eyes still shut. Peter approaches
the empty window, then turns back to Alan.

PETER
I'm going to jump out this window,
Alan. And you're going to help me
do it.

Alan backs off, cowering, spinning, recovering from the gun
blast in his ear.

ALAN
Why, Peter?!

PETER
(waving the gun wildly at
Alan)
So I can fly, damnit!!

Beat.

PETER (CONT'D)
And go find my son.

ALAN
Your son is dead, ⁴⁵Peter! DEAD!

PETER
You're wrong, Alan.

ALAN
(tactlessly, flapping his
arms, cynical)
And what, you think he just - he
just - flew away?! Huh!?

Peter approaches Alan now as he speaks, swaying the power dynamic.

PETER
(confident)
I know he did.

ALAN
(pointing down at the
floor)
This, Peter, this is crazy!

Peter is shocked by Alan's frankness.

PETER
Crazy? Crazy!?! Thank you, Alan!
Finally, a little honesty!

Alan gets serious quick. He turns the "psychologist" switch back on.

ALAN
(quickly, sharply,
articulately)
If he flew away, why hasn't he been
back to visit you, Peter?! Huh??
And where's he been living all this
time? And what the hell has he been
eating for the last three years??
Think, Peter!

Peter gets flustered by Alan's barrage for a moment, then recovers.

PETER
I - I don't know - I just know he's
alive. I can't explain it, and I
promise you, your book can't
either.

Peter kicks the book on the floor. It slides across the floor and out the window. A child behavioral psychology journal.

PETER (CONT'D)
Please, Alan. I *need* you to believe
me. Or I'm gonna' fall.

ALAN
This isn't about me, Peter!

PETER
(quiet)
And what if it was?

ALAN
What does that mean?

PETER
I knew you wouldn't understand. In
fact, I knew you couldn't.

ALAN
So you brought a gun? To make me?
Well, I got news for ya, Peter -
that's not how it works! You can't
just *make* someone believe
something. The brain, it - it
doesn't work that way!

PETER
Don't you see!? You're asking me to
do the same thing. And I can't
either.

Alan concedes with a look (maybe looks to the side,
acknowledging, maybe brings a hand up to his mouth). Beat.

PETER (CONT'D)
(ominous)
And, that's not - exactly - why I
brought the gun...

ALAN
Why did you bring a gun into my
office, Peter?

PETER
I knew you wouldn't be able to
understand, until -

Peter looks into Alan's eyes.

PETER (CONT'D)
Until, you knew exactly what it
felt like to lose a child.

Alan can't breathe for a moment.

ALAN

Peter, what have you done?

Peter picks up the broken picture frame of Alan's daughter again.

PETER

Lily, right? She was so brave.
Didn't even cry.

Alan charges Peter, infuriated. Out of control.

He grabs Peter's neck with one hand, and extends Peter's body out over the precipice of the window.

ALAN

You sick fuck, what have you
done?! Tell me or I swear to God,
I won't just help you jump, I will
push you myself!

PETER

Finally! Come on! Do it! Do it now,
Alan! I'm ready when you are.

Peters feet grasp at the ledge. Broken glass shards rotating beneath them.

ALAN

You're crazy, Peter.

Peter outstretches his arms, looking back over his shoulder at the dropoff behind him.

PETER

What *is* crazy, Alan? Is it
desperation? Is it compulsion? Or
maybe it's just a way of labeling
something we don't understand?

ALAN

(shaking Peter now)

What the fuck have you done to my
daughter, Peter!? Don't think I
won't-

PETER

(choking)

What!? What will you do!? You would
do ANYTHING wouldn't you?! Anything
to get her back if you thought she
was still alive.

Alan pushes Peter further out the window. Peter's feet slipping, grasping.

Then, a breeze hits Alan's face. He notices particles of dust, swirling in the air, hitting the light. Much like the particles Peter was entranced by earlier. Beat.

Alan settles. He releases Peter's neck and takes a step back.

ALAN

She's okay. Lily's not dead.

PETER

How do you know?

ALAN

I just -

Alan looks up at Peter.

ALAN (CONT'D)

I just do. I feel it.

Peter nods. A slight smile. His craziness, his insanity, gone.

Alan looks up, putting pieces together.

PETER

I get the same feeling - when I lay down at night. Only a parent can understand. You just know.

ALAN

But you were there? You saw him jump - you saw him go over -

PETER

(interrupting)

They never found his body. Not a shred of clothing. Not an ounce of blood. They're still calling it a missing person's case.

ALAN

(to himself at first)

I-I almost did something crazy just now. I was this close to killing you.

PETER

What *is* crazy?

ALAN

I - I don't know, Peter. I don't know anymore.

Peter looks at Alan, flashes a smile. He steps back from the window and drops the gun to the floor.

PETER

Thanks, Alan. For trying to understand me. I feel better now.

ALAN

Thank God, Peter. I do - I really do understand how hard this has been, and I am truly sorry about your son.

Peter walks over to Alan, and places his hand on Alan's shoulder.

PETER

Don't be. You did what I couldn't.

Peter abruptly turns. He charges toward the open window, a smile on his face.

Alan chases after him, pleading with him to stop.

ALAN

Please, Peter, no!

INTERCUT footage heading towards cliff-sides/footage of Nicholas being chased by Peter on the cliff (emphasizing the parallels between the two scenes in the editing).

Peter leaps. Soars. Then, gravity takes hold. Peter drops swiftly beneath the ledge.

Alan runs to the ledge and looks over. Just as he reaches it, a black object, a blur, much like the one that hit Alan's window earlier, shoots up past the window and disappears into the sky.

END.

This report was typed by Patrick William Smith.